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November 21, 2019

The Hon. Jeffrey B. Jensen
United States Attorney
United States Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Missouri
Thomas Eagleton U.S. Courthouse
111 S. 10th Street, 20th Floor
St. Louis, MO 63102

Dear Mr. Jensen:

I write following disturbing reports of unacceptable housing conditions in the St. Louis region. For years, residents in the region have had to put up with conditions ranging from significant rodent infestations, to mold, to broken furnaces that leave residents with no source of heat during winter. These conditions are widespread and persistent. As Attorney General of Missouri, for example, I brought a lawsuit against a management company following reports that nearly half the units in a complex it managed were infested with rodents.¹

Recent reports suggest that these housing problems have not only remained—they have become worse. These news stories report that large companies managing housing complexes for predominantly low-income Missourians are failing to maintain units in habitable conditions, illegally evicting tenants,² and requiring tenants to procure costly repairs at their own expense, even though making those repairs is the landlord's responsibility.³ Conditions have become so bad that the City of St. Louis had to make illegal evictions—already prohibited under civil law—a criminal offense.⁴ Recently, the Housing Authority of St. Louis County has ended Section 8 eligibility for at least one large housing company, TEH Realty, for the company's "repeated failure as landlords."⁵

Conditions may be even worse than what these reports suggest. When some landlords neglect their duties, tenants often will not bring complaints. Eviction is a cause, and not just a symptom, of

¹ https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/lawsuit-settled-over-mice-infested-apartments-in-st-louis-public/article_3373efab-3d77-5dd9-82c9-552c90ecd325.html

² https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/columns/tony-messenger/messenger-rogue-landlord-in-st-louis-county-threatens--hour/article_530b2d11-b7bd-56ff-ab99-bc9bcd20b0d5.html

³ https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/columns/tony-messenger/messenger-bridgeton-takes-rogue-landlord-to-court-over-failure-to/article_b625813a-4b40-58d4-8673-a1d3756f3d50.html

⁴ https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/columns/tony-messenger/messenger-rogue-landlord-in-st-louis-county-threatens--hour/article_530b2d11-b7bd-56ff-ab99-bc9bcd20b0d5.html

⁵ https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/st-louis-county-housing-officials-sever-ties-with-t-e/article_da5059aa-210b-5632-a40f-2ef7edb8199e.html

poverty. And many of these tenants fear that, if they raise complaints, a landlord will evict them, either illegally or pretextually over a small-scale infraction.

These reports of housing conditions in the St. Louis region warrant a thorough investigation by your office. For example, federal law restricts the circumstances in which a company receiving federal funds can evict a tenant. 24 CFR § 982.310(a). If, as reports suggest, some housing companies receiving federal funds have illegally evicted tenants and told the Department of Housing and Urban Development otherwise, then those companies have committed a federal crime. 18 U.S.C. § 1012. I encourage you to thoroughly investigate publicly managed housing complexes and landlords in the St. Louis region to determine whether companies that are failing to meet their obligations to provide quality housing have also violated federal law.

At the same time, any enforcement action must be taken only after considering the need to protect tenants from collateral harm. An enforcement action that led to low-income residents losing their homes would only compound the harm.

I therefore ask that you coordinate any enforcement action with the Department of Housing and Urban Development and local housing authorities to ensure that residents who are affected by bad management companies receive all interim relief to which they are entitled, including Tenant Protection Vouchers and Enhanced Vouchers. Coordination would better enable residents to obtain adequate housing with minimal disruption and with the opportunity to stay in their communities.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,



Josh Hawley
U.S. Senator